

150 Years after Crossing the Kaala Paani (Indian Ocean): Challenges Facing the Descendents of Indentured Labourers in South Africa

Brij Maharaj¹

¹University of KwaZulu-Natal, School of Environmental Sciences, Durban, South Africa

maharajb@ukzn.ac.za

The Indian question in South Africa featured prominently on the national agenda for the greater part of the last century. Politicians from diverse parties were unanimous on one issue - the Indian population in South Africa should be reduced to the minimum possible. The main mechanisms to achieve this were denial of political rights, limited employment opportunities and restrictions on their ownership and occupation of land.

Indians managed to survive the economic and political onslaught primarily because of their rich cultural and religious heritage, community survival strategies, and the importance attached to education. Traditionally, South African Indians have been viewed as a homogeneous community, and presented a united front in opposing apartheid.

However, there were various divisions and tensions, related to class, religion, language, geographic origins, and associated changes with the passage of time and isolation from India. The post-apartheid, democratic era has witnessed the resurgence of ethnic and sub-ethnic identities. It would appear that some are trying to re-invent the divisions of 1860. These issues came to the fore in discussions and debates to observe the 150th anniversary of the arrival of indentured labourers in SA. Politics permeated the discussions and the following issues were at the forefront, and will be the focus of this paper: purpose of celebration, who organises, role of SA government, role of Indian government; and finally, is unity possible?

A silent question was whether it was possible to build a democratic, progressive platform from the grassroots level that could articulate the problems and challenges facing the community, without harking back to the ethnic politics and feuding of the tricameral era, or becoming the surrogate of any political party? It would appear that the national strategies to co-ordinate the commemoration the 150th anniversary of the arrival of indentured labourers in South Africa could provide the catalyst to establish such an organisation.